DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 356 300 UD 029 118

AUTHOR Masters, Billie Nave
TITLE Clans of the Street: Tribalism and Urban Street Gangs.
PUB DATE [91]
NOTE 8p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adolescents; *Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Change; Etiology; *Group Membership; *Juvenile Gangs; Need Gratification; School Restructuring; Self Concept; *Social Support Groups; Social Values; *Tribes; *Urban Culture; Urban Problems; Urban Youth; Youth Problems
IDENTIFIERS *Clans; Tribal Citizenship

ABSTRACT

The clan principle, the informal determination of human groups by totem characteristics, commonly accepted standards for self-definition, valued knowledge, and regulation of behavior, is a reality for American Indian and Native Alaskan cultures and for the mainstream urban, suburban, and industrial society as well. The tendency to group individuals by consensus on their mode of social operation and choice of presentation is a fact of contemporary social organization. Historically, street gang behavior has been regarded as a response to conditions in the larger culture that force disadvantaged groups into gang-related activity. In fact, it may be more appropriate to see gangs as representative of an innate desire to band together toward the attainment of mutual goals. The work of Peter Marsh is explored for the insights it offers into the tribal bonding of young people. Through educational restructuring with an interdisciplinary view, a way to harness the social energy of youth may be found that addresses the need to belong to a group and to be a valued member. (SLD)

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Clans of the Street: Tribalism and Urban Street Gangs.

By Dr. Billie Nave Masters, Director.
Advanced Education Research Center
Tustin, California.

Among the legends of the southeastern tribes of American Indians is the story of how Master-of-Breath first divided the people of the Earth into clans, based on observation of their behavior and assigned a name based upon what was seen. People who moved like the deer were called Deer, those who behaved in like manner to the bear were Bear, and so on. In this way, people were both defined and divided by their ways and grouped according to their abilities.

An extension of this allegory into contemporary culture is not difficult to realize. The clan principal, the informal determination of human groups by totem characteristics, commonly accepted standards for self-definition, valued knowledge, and regulation of behavior, is a reality for not only American Indian/Alaska Native cultures but for mainstream urban/suburban/industrial society as well. Whether we label the product of this behavior as teams, clubs, cliques, or communes, the tendency to group individuals by consensus upon their mode of social operation and choice of presentation is both a blessing and a curse of contemporary social organization.

The most striking and frightening examples of this phenomenon with respect to our society is the growth and perpetuation of

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urban street gangs. Through an examination of the roots of this process, and the tribal corollaries which direct us to insight into the origins of these subcultures, a case can be made which will allow us greater understanding of this problem and also may suggest some possible solutions.

The stereotypical response when addressing the origins of street gang culture is to conjure an image reminiscent of a scene from West Side Story: hordes of poor, abused, and marginally literate children shaped by insensitive authority, ineffectual institutions, and the desire to survive. Indeed, traditional scholarship directed along these lines goes a long way toward providing a frame for further discussion.

> The self-concept, or perception of oneself, plays a large part in the motivation of the individual. He may perceive himself as, superior or inferior, intelligent or stupid, attractive or ugly, to name but a few of the multitude of possibilities. It matters little how others perceive him. He operates from his own frame of reference, and all his behavior is affected by this self-concept.
> (p.227. Daniel and Keith, 1969)

Historically inherent in academic thinking concerning causal factors in counter-cultural social activity among United States youth is the idea that gang related behavior is a response created by conditions existing in the larger culture that essentially forces particular groups of socioeconomically disadvantaged subcultures, or ethnic-minority children into gang-related activity. What has been consistently missing from this line of reasoning is an examination of the motivation that actually instigates this process: the natural human

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organizational behavior that direct these children to seek a clan upon which to define themselves.

In my own field, much thought by educational professionals has been directed in recent years to finding explanations for what appears to be an insurmountable barrier pertaining to the social-caste system which is inadvertently perpetuated in many of our public schools. Rather than seeking answers through the indictment of the philosophy of the institutions themselves, although such indictment bear further examination, many educational theorists have sought more personalized explanations centered on the self-selection by the students themselves. An excellent example of this research is the work of Paul Willis and his empirical study on a subculture in England, Learning to Labor: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs. His findings apportioned a major share of responsibility for class-repressive activity to students and their subcultures.

> For those not familiar with his work, Willis' main question was why do working class kids get working class jobs? In an attempt to avoid a simplistic answer, he rejects both liberal (because working-class kids are seen by significant others - that is teachers - to be slow or non-academic) and reproduction theories (because the system means them to fail in school). Instead, Willis puts forth a theory of cultural production which suggests, based upon his own ethnographic observations, that working-class males actively help to produce themselves as future, semi-skilled manual laborers. In other words, it is the lad's own handling of the situation and their development of a counter-school culture (drawn from the wider class culture) that leads them to value manual labor and delivers them to the shop floor. (p. 9,10. Hollands, 1990)

With respect to Willis' findings, it could be said that youth

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of a specific counterculture select and engage in specific activities, adopt philosophies and worldviews, and accept the mandates of the greater culture only to the degree that acquiescence does not interfere with the survival of their own self-definition. Such a conclusion leads to larger questions pertaining to the social contribution of ethnic and gender minority youth in shaping their own destinies and the price of gender/ethnic/cultural diversity with respect to the ability to maintain culture, custom, and language integrity while attempting to succeed in the larger society.

What appears to be required is a fresh societal perspective: a means through which to objectify our perceptions with respect to the needs of multi-ethnic populations in terms of contribution, participation, and expectations. It is safe to say that a reasonable beginning for this task would be to redefine the characteristics of the inclusive social groups and isolate their respective skills and needs.

Just such a social/anthropological approach of understanding self-defined contemporary social groups has been recently addressed by Peter Marsh. He examined the common attributes of tribes, linking the past to the present to shed light upon our present state of social development. Just as our ancestors banded together to hunt and gather more effectively, as more complex needs came into play, the clans formed themselves into tribes to ensure the viability of succeeding generations. Marsh explored

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the needs and motivations which compel us to band together to ensure physical and emotional survival.

> The tribal qualities of the human species color almost every aspect of our lives. They are so basic to us that, were we ever to lose them, it would mean that we had mutated into another species altogether.
> (p. 6. Marsh, 1988)

With the passage of hunting activities as a physical necessity, ritual hunting as a purely symbolic activity has become an integral part of culture. Sports, the observation, strategy, and pursuit skills inherent in science, technology, and the arts all encompass elements of the hunt, and are therefore representative of the innate desire to band together toward the attainment of mutual goals.

> ...but if the tribal urges of a particular group are frustrated they are likely to find an alternate and often damaging outlet. They cannot be suppressed because they are too basic and so, if the ruling authority in any society deny the expression of tribalism in a helpful way, the young males will not simply remain calm and passive. Instead, they will form unofficial tribes and attack the culture which has attempted to cut them off from their primeval inheritance.
> (p. 8. Marsh, 1988)

This tribal-bonding process can be seen among many of the ethnic communities as well as within United States public schools. For example, whenever groups of young males are encouraged to gather together in establishment-sanctioned activities - sports, academic competition, or organized social-service projects, and access to such activities is relatively unrestricted, our society prospers. Where the criteria of inclusion is too narrow -e.g. height, grade-point average,

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parental income, or acquired experience, we see the development of asocial "tribes", or to translate the phenomenon to more idiomatic terms: gangs.

According to Marsh, access to alternative outlets provides the same kind of excitement - planning and tactics, risk, attire, and oral bonding, that is achieved through clan-defined grouping. The entire tribal dichotomy is recreated out of nothing, or more specifically, it is born out of the chaos and duality of their oppressed lives. The proven advantage is that children who are given access to alternative social activities have lower dropout rates, demonstrate better social skills, and pursue higher education in greater numbers with a higher degree of success.

The implications of such a paradigm in the prevention of gang formation are worthy of consideration. Through educational restructuring with an interdisciplinary view, a way to harness the social energy of our youth may now be taking shape that could not only serve to address a critical symptom of our societal ills, but may also have far-reaching implications into the nature and function of the institutions intended to service and educate our children. In this effort it is clear that parent and community involvement, a consideration for the perceptions and feelings of all our children, and a new vision for the developmental process which all our children experience, the educational process, are necessary. The basic human need to belong, to be a valued member must be consciously addressed to

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satisfactorily meet the diversity of challenges that we individually and collectively face as we enter the next century.

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